Wolf Howling in Algonquin Provincial Park

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Cover Photo: Two Park naturalists howling for wolves on a Public Wolf Howl, 1972

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by Dan Strickland

"Wolf howling" as it is understood in Algonquin Provincial Park is a term coined in the early 1960's to describe the act of "going out and howling like a wolf in an attempt to stimulate the howling of wild wolves."

The fact that wolves actually will answer human imitations of their howls has probably been discovered more than once in the history of man (Tolstoy mentions it in his 1862 classic, The Cossacks, for example). Nevertheless, we believe that the most significant "rediscovery" of the willingness of wolves to howl back at human imitators was made here in Algonquin in the wolf research program conducted from 1958 to 1965 by the late Dr. Douglas H. Pimlott for the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests (now the Ministry of Natural Resources). In that study it became apparent very quickly that although wolves and their kills could be spotted from the air quite easily on frozen winter lakes or against the snow in leafless forests, they were almost impossible to find, let alone seriously study, during the summer. In an attempt to solve this problem Pimlott (1979) took up the suggestion by Yorke Edwards (who later worked with the Canadian Wildlife Service and the Provincial Museum in Victoria, B.C.) of using recorded wolf howls. The late W.W.H. Gunn, noted pioneer recorder of bird songs, was enlisted to make a recording of the captive wolves, coyotes, and coyote-dog hybrids at the Wildlife Research Station in the hope that playing such a recording out into the night might elicit an answer from any wolves that happened to be within range. On August 5, 1959, on the very first attempt made with the recording, replies were obtained from wild wolves. This was a major breakthrough in the study of wolves and before the summer was over, the home areas of two packs had been located and contact made with several others.

Very early on it was realized that reasonable human imitations of howling were just as effective as recordings in getting wolves to answer. The bulky sound equipment of the day was soon left at home altogether and it became standard practice for the wolf researchers to do all their "wolf howling" with their own voices. In the years following its initial discovery, the technique was used to find dens and to conduct summer censuses over the entire 1000 square mile wolf study area in southern Algonquin Park. These were accomplishments which the researchers had only been able to dream about until then.

After its initial development as a means to find and estimate the numbers of wolves (Pimlott 1960, Pimlott et al. 1969) the technique was used to study the summer movements and habits of wolves (Joslin 1967, Voigt 1973, Carbyn 1979) and also the biological significance of howling itself (Theberge and Falls 1967, Harrington 1975).

Why Do Wolves Howl?

There are several answers to this question but one thing which can be said at the outset is that wolves do not howl when they are attacking their prey. Indeed, it is not even certain that deer and moose are disturbed by the sound of howling — possibly because wolves are not a threat when they are vocalizing but perhaps also because prey animals simply fail to make a connection between howling and its source.

There is little doubt that individual wolves sometimes keep in touch with each other or with the pack by howling and it is difficult to think of a better way for a social animal to maintain such contact in thickly forested country in the dark of night. Howling also occurs,

however, when the entire pack is together and on these occasions the howling evidently serves some purpose other than bringing them together. Group howling often occurs spontaneously at summer sunsets just before the adults leave the pups to go off for a night's hunting and again when they come back at dawn. Observations of packs at such times have revealed that there is considerable excitement and what we humans might be tempted to call displays of comradeship associated with these group howling sessions and we may speculate that it serves to strengthen their social bonds, perhaps the way community singing does in human beings.

There is also considerable evidence that howling serves as a territorial declaration and warning to other packs or lone wolves. Studies with radio collared wolves have shown that dominant wolves are more likely to answer human howls and to approach their source, as if answering a challenge from some unknown intruder, whereas lower status wolves may not answer at all but move away from the "intruder" instead. Similarly, wolves are more likely to answer if they are at a well-known rendezvous site, as opposed to some other less well known location nearer the edges of their territory, and this, too, suggests a greater willingness to "stand and fight" on ground that is clearly theirs.

Pups, however, especially when they first find their voices in earnest, towards the end of July and on into August and September, are quite another matter. Young wolves at that time of year are ready to howl at the least provocation and regardless of where the stimulus comes from. It may be a howl from an older wolf in their pack, one from a total stranger, or even from a human being doing his or her best to sound like the real thing. One reason that pups may be so eager to howl in late summer and early fall is that they are often left on their own by the adults at that time of year. As was discovered here in Algonquin Park (and through the technique of wolf howling) wolf pups outgrow their den by early July as a rule and are moved to a succession of "rendezvous sites" for the rest of the summer. A typical rendezvous site in Algonquin is a grassy beaver meadow or open bog providing ready access to water, shade in the nearby trees, and, in the meadow itself, plenty of room to romp and play, chase each others' tails and pounce on unsuspecting mice or grasshoppers. Although wolf pups in summer are agile they are not ready to accompany older pack members on actual hunts and that is why they are parked in rendezvous sites for days, weeks, or even months at a time. Every night the adults go off and hunt on their own and, if they are lucky, bring food back to the pups waiting at the rendezvous site. This pattern usually continues on into October when the pups are finally big and strong enough to start accompanying the older wolves on their travels.

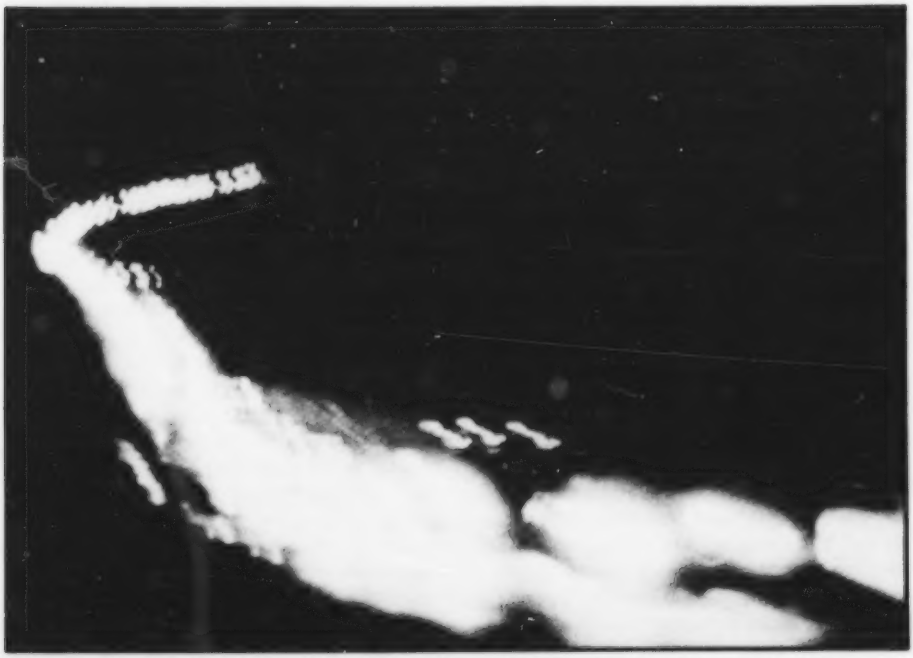
Until then, however, the pups are left on their own in the rendezvous site each night and it may be that their "loneliness" is a reason for their readiness to howl back at (that is, make contact with) what they perceive as a returning pack member. On that account alone, August and September are the months to hear wolves in Algonquin Park but there is another reason as well. Because the pups are often left in rendezvous sites for long periods, the discovery of a wolf pack usually means that one can go back to the same place the following night and many times thereafter and have an excellent chance of hearing the same wolves again and again. There is no guarantee that the wolves won't move but the chances of hearing them in the same place several nights in a row are far better than they will be later on in the fall when rendezvous sites are abandoned for good and the pack is constantly on the move.

The practical consequence of the late summer tendency of wolf pups to howl readily and to stay in one place for long periods is that park staff have an excellent chance of finding wolves and then being able to organize, with a high expectation of success, a public wolf howling expedition to the same place a night or two later.

Public Wolf Howls

With so much wolf research activity going on in the early 1960's the naturalist staff headquartered at the Park Museum soon found themselves acting as an information centre on wolf research. Many campers had heard wolves (or researchers) howling and wanted to know more about what was going on. Still, when an invitation was extended in THE RAVEN of August 7, 1963 for an evening of wolf howling to take place on August 17, no-one seriously imagined that many people would turn out. In fact, the response was overwhelming. When a few of the staff casually went down to the appointed meeting place at the Two Rivers picnic ground, they found a traffic jam of 180 vehicles and over 600 people. Somehow the jumble was sorted out and history's first "public wolf howl" got underway and it went on to get a faint reply from one wolf. The modest success of that first expedition was almost irrelevant insofar as all doubts were removed about how great the level of public interest was. The way was clearly open for park staff to introduce people to wild wolves on a really large scale.

Nevertheless, in spite of these initial indications, public wolf howls did not immediately become an integral part of the Algonquin interpretive program. Howls were held in 1964 and 1965 but the organizational problems were intimidating and there was poor success in getting answers, partly because of little or no prior searching and partly because the wolf population adjacent to Highway 60 was largely eliminated in the last phase of the wolf research program (which sought to determine the sex and age structure of the study population). In fact, no wolf howls were held in 1966-68 and it was only in 1969 that they were started again. They have continued, basically without interruption, up to the present writing. All told, including the 1987 season, there have been 53 public wolf howls, with 52,833



Three km of a 6 km line of cars going to hear wolves on a Public Wolf Howl, August 24, 1970

participants (an average of 997 per outing). Wolves were heard on 62% of the expeditions.

For a variety of logistical reasons (such as scheduling days off) we find it necessary to designate one day (traditionally Thursday) as a possible public wolf howl day, but we actually schedule one only if we have heard wolves the night before at a suitable location, often a rendezvous site. This is for several reasons: with a group of perhaps 1000 people it is impractical to make more than one or two stops and therefore we cannot search for wolves during the expedition; it avoids raising false hopes in the wolf howl participants; and it reduces unproductive effort and expense. This means, however, that in a given year we may have no public wolf howls at all or perhaps as many as five. It also means that we never announce a public wolf howl until the morning of the day it takes place. This is frustrating to people who want to plan their visits ahead but saves personnel from committing themselves to wolf howls that would almost certainly be unsuccessful.

It is apparent, therefore, that the first step in holding a public wolf howl is to look for wolves. To do this, we schedule two teams of wolf howlers (each consisting of two summer naturalists) to go out on Tuesday and Wednesday nights, starting in the last week of July and continuing if need be until the last week of August. Between them, the two teams cover the park's approximately 80 km of public highway and associated secondary roads. They howl at every suitable location and are out for 3-4 hours. We reduce our effort to the level of periodic checking if we find a suitable pack in a rendezvous site but resume full-scale searching if the pack moves.

Assuming we do hear a pack with pups in a suitable location on a Wednesday night, we start preparations for the actual event the following morning. One of the first steps is to put up previously prepared posters at all campground offices, washrooms, lodges, etc., which takes two people with vehicles, working separately, the whole morning. Typically, the phone is also very busy because in the days and weeks leading up to wolf howling season, we have advised people to call us on Thursdays to see if we are going ahead with a wolf howl the same day. Other preparations include arranging for the four to six radio-equipped vehicles that will be required, planning the exact movements and duties of each of the 12-16 staff who will be involved, and the typing and printing of the resulting two-page "battle plan." It may also be necessary to inspect the howling site to take measurements, occasionally to do minor road work, and to decide the optimum placement of the vehicles when the wolf howl actually takes place. All these details are equivalent to a day's work for at least one person.

An hour and a half before the scheduled start of the wolf howl, all participating staff assemble in the Park Museum. We go over the whole operation, make sure everyone understands his role in the exercise, and distribute equipment such as walkie-talkies, traffic safety vests, and flashlights (the kind used by airport ground crews).

At the Outdoor Theatre the staff have various tasks, including counting and directing cars, and efficiently distributing the rush of vehicles so that as many as possible can park simultaneously, thus avoiding a traffic jam on the highway. We must also be prepared to turn people away when the lot is full (approximately 370 vehicles — roughly 1500 people). On one occasion in 1971 we had to turn away 1000 disappointed campers.

After a formal welcome to the wolf howl, a staff member gives an illustrated talk lasting about 30 minutes on Algonquin wolves — their life history, ecology, management, history — and on the research program and the development of wolf howling. The talk includes a tape recording of a pack of wolves responding to human howls. We do not, of course, guarantee that people are going to hear the real thing later in the evening, but we do tell them that we are going to try at a place where wolves were heard the night before. We end the Outdoor Theatre part of the program by telling people a little about the searching and other preparations that have made the expedition possible. We also give them the instructions to be followed if success is to be achieved and we ask our human

howlers to demonstrate the single and group howls that they will use later on. All instructions and information must be given at the Outdoor Theatre because it is impossible to speak to the group at the howling location.

The actual expedition to the howling location is a large and impressive spectacle. A typical turnout of 1000 people means 250 cars and these, even when moving at only 50 km/h, still stretch for at least 10 km. Most people have only a ribbon of tail lights ahead of them and headlights behind them as far as they can see and first-time participants can scarcely believe that "all those people" will actually get to hear wolves. Nevertheless, the procedure works. We usually split the line and centre each half at the optimum howling location (facing in opposite directions on opposite sides of the road). When the cars park, of course, they are much closer together than when they were moving but still there are so many that no-one can see all of the cars or, in many cases, realize that more cars are still arriving far down the line. Everyone has been instructed to wait quietly beside their cars with the lights and ignition off, and the degree of silence, patience, and cooperation from the participants has to be seen to be believed. No-one wants to jeopardize their chances of hearing wolves and everyone waits for the moment when all is ready and the human howlers make their attempt to get an answer.

And when a pack of wolves breaks out with a tremendous clamour a few hundred metres away under a star studded sky, even a seasoned wolf howler is likely to feel as though the hair on the back of his neck wants to stand on end. There is little doubt that the howling of wolves arouses deep emotions in human beings. Perhaps it is the awakening of a buried wish for the wild freedom of remote ancestors; the mystery of an animal that responds to us but which we almost never see; the thrill of direct communication with a legendary outlaw that has resisted for centuries our efforts to destroy it; the magic of a night in wolf country, including even that tinge of fear carried over from childhood wolf stories. Whatever the exact reason, the impact is profound.

After the first answer — or even if there is none — we wait ten minutes and try again. Following the second attempt the lines of cars are started up and people return to their campsites and lodges, having spent one of the most memorable evenings of their lives.

Howling on Your Own

Public wolf howls, or smaller expeditions which are often arranged through the Park Museum for organized groups, are both good ways to hear wolves but there is nothing to stop you from trying it on your own. Here are a few pointers.

Season — Any month, but your chances are much reduced in April, May and June, and reach a maximum in August and September.

Weather — Wind and rain are the most serious obstacles. If there is enough wind to move the treetops or bend the grass by the roadside your chances are not good. Remember that you are trying to reach animals that may be a mile away, and even a light breeze could prevent your voice reaching them or theirs reaching you. Rain falling on leaves or on the ground may not sound noisy close at hand, but when you consider that this sound is spread all over the thousands of acres you are trying to cover, you will see what it could do to the sound waves of your voice. Find something better to do until the weather changes. There is no evidence that wolves are affected by moonlight, as is often supposed. It may be clear or cloudy, but it must be calm.

Time of Day — Wolves howl at all hours but mostly between dusk and dawn, and as often after midnight as before. Just after dark and just before dawn offer maximum possibilities, because the wolves are more likely to be together then, while during the night they may be hunting over a wide area.

Where — It is often imagined that the best place to howl for wolves is "way back in the park interior" but, in fact, the best results are obtained right along Highway 60. It's not that

the highway area has any more wolves than the interior, it's just that you can drive along the highway and try many different places in a single evening whereas, in the interior, you cannot travel at night and are limited to trying at the one location where you are camping. If there happen to be wolves there, fine, otherwise you are out of luck. Another thing you can do to maximize your chances of howling up some wolves is to ask at the Park Museum where wolves have been heard recently.

Unless you have a good tip on places to try, your guess is as good as anybody's. Drive along the highway, stopping to howl every 2 km or so, particularly where the topography will give you good coverage — over a marsh or small lake, or along a valley. In general, low ground is better than hilltops, as long as you aren't hemmed in by high hills.

How to Howl — First decide on a stopping point. Park cars well off the pavement and don't slam doors or talk above a whisper. If you can hear a vehicle on the road, no matter how far away, wait until it passes beyond sight or hearing.

The general technique we have worked out in Algonquin Park for wolf howling is for one person to start by giving a single long howl. If, after a 30 second wait, there has been no answer, the same person gives a second, single howl followed by another wait and, if necessary, by another, third, single howl and a third wait. If the single howls don't work, two or more people (the more the better) give a group howl. This consists of everyone giving three or four howls but in an "overlapping" manner, with someone howling at every given moment even if you yourself are taking a breath between your individual howls. The effect of a group howl is remarkably like a real pack howl and very often it is effective where single howls have failed. (The theory of doing single howls first is that very often they do work and, since howling is hard on the throat, it is better to do the least amount of work necessary. Besides, in a group howl, wolves

sometimes start to answer before the human howlers have finished but if everyone is howling no one realizes that the wolves are answering until the human group howl is finished and some of the answer is therefore missed). If there has been no answer after three group howls, with the same intervening waits observed with the single howls, it means that there are no wolves there to be heard or, sometimes, that they just don't feel like answering. Either way you are better off to move along and try elsewhere.

Don't worry if you don't sound exactly like a wolf, the important thing is to get a long, loud, high-pitched noise belting out into the night. But do try to howl, not yell. That is, howl from your throat, not from the lips and give it everything you have. It is a good sign if you can hear your echo from far off hills; that way you know your sound is carrying. Remember that when wolves do answer, it is very difficult or impossible to get them to answer again for 20 or 30 minutes. In other words, don't torture your throat needlessly until the wolves have had a good chance to build up their inclination to answer once again.

Interpretation — If you get an answer it is interesting to speculate on just what you have heard. From July to October the voices of pups and adults are noticeably different. High-pitched yelps and bird-like squeaks and squeals will be pups trying to howl, and sometimes this is all you will hear. Sustained howls at lower pitch, or throaty barks will be adults. Unless there are only two or three wolves or you have heard the same pack often enough to recognize individual howls, you can only guess how many there are. It is easy to overestimate numbers. We have heard listeners guess 25 or 30 wolves when there were fewer than ten. In a pack howl lasting a half-minute, each wolf will howl two or three times, so even if you could count each howl you might get 30 howls from 10 wolves. Even counting pups, more than 10 in an Algonquin pack would be exceptional. After October and through the winter it is not possible to distinguish pups from adults with any degree of accuracy, and it is really not worth trying.

Conclusion

It is interesting to view public wolf howls in the context of evolving attitudes toward the wolf. In the early days of Algonquin Park it was taken for granted that the destruction of wolves was a normal and desirable pursuit. George Bartlett, Algonquin Park Superintendent from 1898 to 1922, regularly wrote articles for Rod and Gun magazine with such titles as "How shall we destroy the wolf?" (Bartlett 1909). Apparently the only controversy in those days was whether the use of poison was legitimate.

The next step in the evolution of the Ontario government's attitude toward wolves was the commencement of the Algonquin wolf research program and the concomitant protection of wolves in the Park. Even so, the program ended in 1964 and 1965 with a determined effort to collect most of the wolves in the Park study area. Less than a decade later, even this sort of destruction of wolves had become unthinkable. For in that period the public image of the wolf had been transformed from a mysterious, fearsome beast to the very symbol of the wild country people come to enjoy in Algonquin. Many factors are responsible for this decided shift in public attitudes but we believe that the interpretive use of wolf howling has made a significant contribution. To our knowledge there have been at least 18 articles on the Algonquin program in the popular press of North America. There have also been radio and television programs featuring the wolf howls. Letters of enquiry regularly come to us from all over North America and occasionally from Europe.

Wolf howling programs of various kinds have been instituted in Prince Albert, Riding Mountain, and Jasper National Parks and in Sibley Provincial Park in Ontario. So far, these have been conducted on a much smaller scale than those in Algonquin but they have met with the same extraordinarily enthusiastic response from the public. In a very real sense, it can be said that wolves now regularly meet and, through their own howls, convince thousands of park visitors that they have a place in our world.

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